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SUBJECT: INCREASING OUR SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY ENGAGEMENT
WITH SAUDI ARABIA -- A CALL FOR AN ESTH POSITION AND PROGRAM

REF: A. RIYADH 659
[B](#). RIYADH 1278
[C](#). RIYADH 1302
[D](#). RIYADH 1417
[E](#). RIYADH 1492

Summary -----

[1](#)1. (SBU) In light of our robust and rapidly expanding cooperation with Saudi Arabia in the areas of environment, science, technology, and health, Post recommends posting an ESTH officer in Riyadh. Ongoing activities under the December 2008 Science and Technology MOU, as well as ongoing health collaboration, merit the full-time attention of an ESTH officer, as do increasing Saudi engagement and interest in climate change and the deployment of renewable energy technologies such as solar power. The fulfillment of King Abdullah's ambitious vision to develop a knowledge-based economy, diversified away from petroleum production, is dependent upon partnership. The SAG consistently and increasingly requests U.S. public and private sector assistance to reach its goals, and a well-funded ESTH program could more effectively address these requests. Finally, an ESTH officer supported by program funding could facilitate increased educational exchanges in the areas of environment, science, technology, and health. End summary.

Science and Technology -----

[1](#)2. (SBU) In December 2008, the United States and Saudi Arabia signed a Science and Technology MOU creating a framework for expanding our cooperation in a range of areas. In May 2009, a large Saudi and U.S. delegation met in several working groups in Riyadh to map out specific areas for further cooperation. The two sides will meet again on December 3-4 in Washington to discuss space cooperation, including Saudi interest in working with NASA on three satellite launches in the next four years.

[1](#)3. (SBU) The King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology (KACST) is the SAG's coordinator for our science and technology cooperation. KACST, a collection of four research centers and effectively Saudi Arabia's science ministry, is very interested in expanding cooperation across a broad range of science fields with the United States. KACST officials have set up two dozen partnerships with U.S. universities to pursue specific scientific research programs. KACST was a primary driver behind the conclusion of the S&T agreement because it wanted to increase direct engagement with USG science agencies. The ongoing S&T program has already opened up several potential areas for future cooperation. KACST is very interested in expanding cooperation in energy and innovation, including holding working group meetings early in 2010 which could set the stage for specific research

cooperation over the next year.

Health

13. (SBU) Our two countries are working in a number of related areas, including health diplomacy between the Ministry of Health and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC). Under this program, the CDC is helping Saudi Arabia create a world-class national health survey and information platform, which will significantly improve the SAG's ability to monitor and respond to public health issues such as H1N1 in Saudi Arabia. The CDC and MOH are testing this system during this year's Hajj pilgrimage, the world's largest and most intense gathering of people. If successful, this system will serve as a model for a number of other developing countries.

14. (SBU) This cooperation on infectious diseases and mass gatherings has spurred the Minister of Health to seek to expand our bilateral health cooperation. Saudi Arabia is acutely aware that it needs to expand its health care system to meet the needs of its rapidly growing, young population. The SAG is looking to build more than 1,000 clinics and hundreds of hospitals, and the Minister of Health is working to improve the quality of care. Saudi Arabia is also aware that it needs to rapidly improve its scientific capacity to confront the growing incidence of some kinds of cancer and regionally prevalent diseases. Increasing scientific capacity also supports the King's vision of developing a knowledge economy to diversify away from an oil economy. The Minister is specifically interested in pursuing cooperative scientific research projects with the National Institutes of

RIYADH 00001553 002.2 OF 003

Health (NIH) and other U.S. institutions, and has already set up cooperative programs with a number of U.S. universities and clinics, such as the Cleveland Clinic. The Minister has requested an MOU with the Department of Health and Human Services that would facilitate cooperation in these areas, and would increase educational exchanges, including sending more Saudis to U.S. medical schools (ref D).

Environment

15. (SBU) The Saudis are increasingly concerned about protecting their environment, particularly with regard to rising air pollution, access to fresh water, and other environmental issues related to food security. Access to fresh water is a serious issue as natural aquifers are exhausted by farming (e.g., wheat). Saudis are increasingly aware that an increase in global temperatures could threaten their current vegetation and the little arable land that exists. Petroleum Minister Al-Naimi has noted that one of the primary motivations for the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) is to develop high saline tolerant crops, in part to cope with the environmental challenges Saudi Arabia faces (refs B and E). These challenges will grow as the population expands, putting more pressure on the land and increasing energy demand (electricity demand is increasing 8-10% per year).

16. (SBU) Saudi Arabia is interested in promoting the development of renewable energy. The Presidency of Meteorology and Environment (PME) and the Ministry of Petroleum and Mineral Resources have been actively supporting the development of renewable energy, especially solar power. Minister Al-Naimi has publicly stated that Saudi Arabia's goal is to become the "Saudi Arabia of solar," exporting as much electricity generated by solar as it exports in oil today (Ref E). Saudi Arabia recognizes it needs to reach out to international partners to develop this technology to meet the demands of its growing population. Saudi Arabia is an active participant in the "Four Kingdoms" project to develop Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) technology, and is pursuing joint scientific projects with a number of companies and

countries on a range of new technologies.

¶7. (SBU) Saudi Arabia is also acutely aware of the need to protect its fragile wildlife. The National Commission for Wildlife Conservation and Development has a long history of partnership with U.S. agencies in developing its own corps of park rangers. Saudi Arabia faces significant challenges, however, in protecting native flora and fauna as development expands into protected areas. The SAG is interested in learning more from the U.S. about how we work with local populations to support economic development in a sustainable way.

¶8. (SBU) Saudi Arabia also would like to expand educational exchanges and partnerships with the United States. Saudi Arabia has been an enthusiastic participant in the GLOBE program since its inception.

Political Context and Recommendation

¶9. (SBU) As the Middle East's largest economy and the Gulf's largest population, Saudi Arabia will play an important role in determining how the region will develop in the future. King Abdullah has an ambitious agenda for his country to diversify its economy away from its heavy reliance on oil and towards a knowledge economy that generates satisfying, sustainable jobs for his people. The SAG has made it clear that it is looking to the U.S. to be its leading partner in meeting that challenge. This partnership involves working with both the private sector, including attracting investments in advanced technologies like those Dow and Exxon have announced, and USG agencies, such as NASA on space cooperation. Meeting this challenge will not only help the Kingdom meet its economic development goals, but will also help it improve its domestic security situation by providing the kind of sustainable jobs and economic opportunity that are likely to reduce the attraction of extremist elements.

¶10. (SBU) The Mission is working hard to partner with the SAG in these areas, and appreciates the tremendous support from our colleagues in Washington, led by OES. We look forward to meeting the new Science Envoy for this region, and expect he will bring much energy and guidance to our efforts. We could be more effective, however, if we had an ESTH position in the Econ Section in Riyadh to concentrate full-time on this large

RIYADH 00001553 003 OF 003

and growing agenda. An ESTH position could devote more time and energy to following this fast-moving set of issues, including coordinating with the increasing number of USG agencies working with Saudi Arabia in this field. This position could also assist the ESTH hub in Amman and other posts in the region, as well as liaise more effectively with the GCC headquarters in Riyadh on ESTH issues. It would be useful to support this position with the provision of an LES staff member, given language constraints in some of the ministries.

¶11. (SBU) It would also be very helpful to support such a position with program funding, as envisioned in the President's June 4 Cairo speech. We have found tremendous interest in various Saudi communities in learning more about how to approach, scientifically and technologically, a range of environmental issues, from conservation of endangered species to climate change. Having the resources to support exchange visits to the U.S. and support local groups would significantly improve our ability to communicate our message.

The UK made notable advances in its ability to engage the Saudis on climate change issues, for instance, when it offered to co-fund the Kingdom's first project on sustainability with a local research institute. Providing an ESTH position as well as program funding would help the U.S. mission here to foster the creation of centers of scientific excellence in Saudi Arabia and in the Arabian Peninsula region. Establishing a fully supported ESTH position in

Riyadh would also capitalize on the Department's recent decision to allow the return of family members, making it easier to recruit to fill this exciting new position.

SMITH